

Using direct mail to promote consulting services and professional practices

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For dentists, consultants, attorneys, accountants, advertising agencies, public relation firms, and other organizations and individuals offering professional services, direct mail can be an effective means of generating a controlled quantity of highly qualified leads quickly and at low cost. However, the majority of professional practices are unsuccessful with direct mail - largely because they do not understand how it works or how to use it. Following are some suggestions on how to successfully use direct mail to generate new business for consulting or professional services:

1. DEVELOP A PRIMARY OFFER.

The main reason direct mail for consulting services fails is the lack of a specific offer.

Lameley ending a letter with "Looking forward to working with you" or "I will call in a week or two" is certain to depress response to almost zero. If you tell people you will call them, they then have no incentive to call you first.

Far better is to identify the next step in the sales process and then tell the reader to take it.

Most consultants want the mailing to result in an initial meeting with the prospective client. Therefore, the letter might offer a "free, no-obligation initial consultation."

Being more specific about the nature of this exploratory session and attaching a benefit to it will increase response. For example: "We will analyze your current insurance coverage at no cost and make suggestions that will reduce your annual premiums by 10 percent - or more." Or: "Free exam."

2. DEVELOP A SECONDARY OFFER.

The primary offer will attract those prospects who are most eager to do business today or in the near future.

However, this represents only a small fraction of the potential market. Therefore, a secondary offer is needed to attract those prospects who are not ready to meet right now but may have a need in three or six or 12 months.

This secondary offer is usually a free booklet, special report, brochure, fact sheet or other printed information the reader can send for by calling or mailing back a postpaid business reply card. I usually stress the *primary* offer in the body copy of my letter and the *secondary* offer in the P.S. For example: "P.S. To receive a free report explaining our four-step Market Planning Process, complete and mail the reply card today."

Typically, from 50 percent to 90 percent of those who respond request the free information (secondary offer) rather than a face-to-face meeting (primary offer). Calling those who request the free booklet only and "selling" them on the benefits of a free consultation will reveal that 10 percent to 25 percent of the booklet requesters have genuine interest and can be talked into a meeting.

3. ENCOURAGE BOTH PHONE AND MAIL RESPONSE.

Always include a business reply card in mailings; its absence can depress response to almost zero. Some consultants feel that using a business reply card in a personalized mailing aimed at executive prospects is somehow unprofessional. This is nonsense.

Stress that the reader can respond either by mailing the reply card or calling. To encourage telephone response, mention the phone number in the letter copy, even if it appears on the letterhead. Omitting either one of these two basic response options (mail or telephone), will depress response.

4. ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY.

Prospects want to deal with consultants who are experts in their field. Here are some techniques that can build this sense of credibility into the direct mail package:

- * Enclose an article you have written that deals with the topic of the consulting service being sold. This will help convince the prospect of your expertise.

- * Enclose a recent article written *about* you. This establishes that you are a recognized authority.

- * Mention some of your clients - especially well-known names in the prospect's industry. If this would cause the prospect to worry about confidentiality, mention that you have obtained permission to list the names.

- * Enclose copies of letters of referral written for you by your clients.

Testimonials are extremely effective; they make prospects feel comfortable and confident in your ability to serve them successfully.

- * Create a separate brochure that answers any questions the prospect might have about your service and lists your credentials. This kind of "full disclosure" alleviates anxiety and creates the impression that you are reliable and professional in your dealings.

- * Include your photo on the brochure, unless you think your appearance is a negative (e.g., you are extremely young-looking or odd in grooming or dress). A photo gives prospects the feeling that they know you before they even meet or talk with you.

5. USE OTHER PROMOTION TECHNIQUES TO BUILD YOUR REPUTATION.

Direct mail is effective for generating immediate leads, but it is not the primary tool for enhancing credibility.

To build a professional reputation, you must engage in an ongoing program of self-marketing that includes such activities as: writing articles, writing books, newsletter publishing, speaking engagements, teaching, seminars, networking, and being active in industry organizations and local business clubs.

Performing these activities will lead to a higher response to direct mail because the recipient will have already heard of you when he receives your letter. Without these ancillary marketing activities, your name will be unknown, and response rates will be significantly lower.